

# German jobless rate rises, while Spain's falls

The number of Germans out of work rose for the ninth month sequential in December, although by less than expected

Labour Office data showed the jobless figure rose by 3,000 in seasonally-adjusted terms to 2.942 million. That is less than expected and the total has stabilised close to historically low levels as Europe's largest economy remains relatively unscathed by the Eurozone debt crisis.

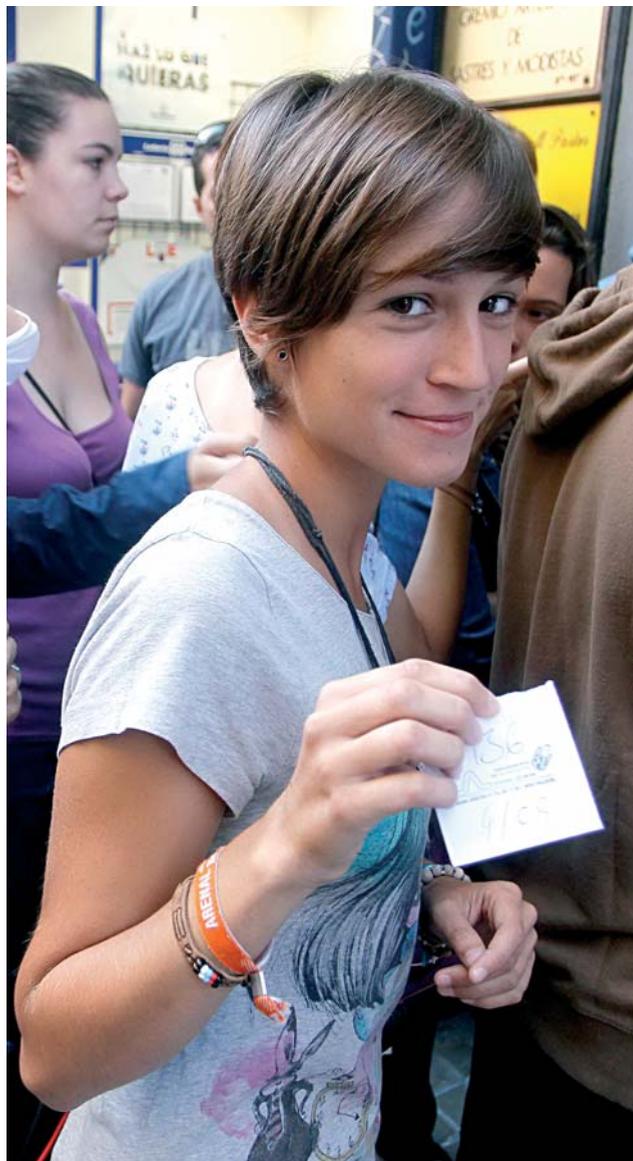
Economists said Germany is showing signs of weakness, but should avoid recession. The unemployment rate held steady at 6.9 percent. "Despite the economic dip, the labour market is not suffering a breakdown," said Stefan Schilbe at HSBC Trinkaus.

"Companies are not willing to put qualified workers out of a job, also in the light of the high number of unfilled jobs. "Once the economy improves in the course of the year, unemployment too is likely to fall again with a delay," Schilbe added.

In Spain, the number of people out of work fell in December. It was down by 1.2 percent. The first monthly decline since July came as the service sector hired more workers in the run-up to Christmas. The latest data still means 4.8 million people are unemployed in the

Eurozone's fourth-biggest economy.

The monthly figure records the number of Spaniards registered as out of work, and is considered less reliable than the country's official unemployment rate. That rate hit a record 25 percent in the third quarter to September, the highest since the Franco dictatorship ended in the 1970s. The only comparable level in the Eurozone is in Greece which, in recession for six years, recorded a monthly unemployment rate of 26 percent in September.



People queue up to register for a German language course at the German Centre in Valencia

## Russia offers way out to tax-weary French actor

President Vladimir Putin has signed a decree granting Russian citizenship to legendary French actor Gerard Depardieu though it is unclear if the film star had made an official application

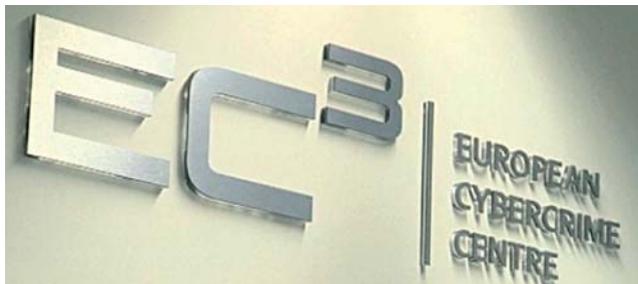
Depardieu recently renounced his French citizenship ahead of plans by the socialist government to introduce a 75 percent tax rate on annual earnings over the million euro mark. Russia has a fixed income tax rate of 13 percent. The actor has moved to the Belgian border town of Nechin. He is quoted as saying he could count on three countries to welcome him: Belgium, Montenegro and Russia.

The 64-year-old has a close relationship with controversial Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov. But the so-called 'super-tax' in France may not be introduced as the French Constitutional Council recently censured the measure. Gerard Depardieu has said the ruling would make 'no difference' to him.

## Unpublished photo of Princess Diana up for auction

A photo of a young Princess Diana and a friend on a skiing holiday which a British tabloid decided not to publish is going on sale in the US

The 1979 picture shows Diana with her friend Adam Russell. The paper's decision came two days before the official announcement of her engagement to Prince Charles in 1981. The photo is being sold by RR Auctions, based in New Hampshire.



## EU's New Year resolution: crack down on cybercrime

The EU has made a New Year's resolution: to get tough on Internet criminals

It has just opened a new cybercrime centre in the Dutch city of the Hague to crack down on illegal online activity. Officials say fraudsters steal millions from such activities each year.

The European Commission proposed the new centre in March last year, saying an EU-

wide is the best way to dealing with cross-border crime. The EU executive believes this coordinated approach will see more internet criminals put behind bars.

The Centre will focus on online fraud, Internet predators who sexually exploit children, and hackers. It is located inside the headquarters of Europol, the European Criminal Intelligence Agency.

## Increased downloads slam Virgin France

Virgin Megastore, one of the French largest music retailers, requires restructuring, being near bankruptcy

The books-to-music retailer, which employs 1,000 people, is the latest victim of an industry-wide slump in CD and DVD sales as people increasingly download films and music online. Virgin Megastore France, which is no longer owned by founder Richard Branson, has not made a profit in four years and has debt estimated at 22m Euros.

Filing to suspend payments is the first step towards a court-ordered company restructuring in France. Virgin France is not the only music

retailer suffering from the industry slump.

Its chief domestic rival, Fnac, is being spun off by parent group PPR and has sold its Italian businesses.

In Britain, HMV last month said that it had '12 critical days' to pull in Christmas sales and help to avoid a likely breach of its banking agreements at the end of January. Virgin France is currently owned by private equity firm Butler Capital Partners, which bought a majority stake in 2007 from French media-to-aerospace group La-

gardere, which had bought the chain from Branson in 2001.

The group, which operates 26 Virgin-branded stores in France, including a flagship operation on the Champs-Elysees in Paris, generates sales of nearly 300m Euros. High rental costs in high-profile locations in city centres and falling CD and DVD sales amid competition from rising film and music downloads, as well as a recent drop in book sales, were mostly to blame for the group's financial problems, a spokeswoman said.

# Playing games with human mind's neurons

Austrian company launches gadget able to read thoughts via computer telepathy

"We have developed so called brain-computer interfaces which allow the user to control different devices and programmes without hands, by means of the user's thoughts." That is how Christoph Hintermüller of the Project Management and Research team at g.tec Guger Technologies sums up a machine which can quite literally read the mind.

It is intended for disabled patients, and the system made up of electrodes which sit on the scalp translates user intentions into electronic commands.

"A brain-computer interface captures various electrical impulses from

the head of the user, and decodes them into specific tasks and actions," continued Christoph Hintermüller.

That allows the user to play an online computer game, hands-free. The user selects the commands by simply looking at the blinking arrows on the screen. The frequency of the flashing is reproduced in the brain cortex and read by the electrodes.

"As soon as we have understood the electroencephalography patterns produced by the groups of neurons in the brain, we can map the brain activity to any commands for any device, like a television or a motorised system for the home," said Arnau



Espinosa Manzanal of the Research and Development Department, g.tec Guger Technologies.

Developed within a European research project, this technology makes home electronics more acces-

sible. A user can navigate through various on-screen menus by simply focusing attention on the commands.

This way even severely disabled people can compose text messages to

communicate with others in social networks on the Internet.

With further improvement, this system will allow to remotely control robotic assistants and even personal transportation vehicles such as electric wheelchairs.

"The system will be further developed to easier integrate with many more systems and programs, and also to use additional electrical and mechanical impulses from the whole body, because some patients still have residual motor functions and they're comfortable also using them, and this system can be designed to include such signals," concluded Christoph Hintermüller.